Negro's Most Significant Advances in Louisiana Came With Legal Action

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NEW ORLEANS (UPI) — The year 1963 has been called the Year of the Negro Revolution, but in Louisiana the Negro's most significant advances were the result of economic and legal action, rather than demonstration.

The mass marches and rallies were the largest and longest the state had seen since Reconstruction, but they apparently produced few direct results.

There were near-riots in the tiny Mississippi River town of Plaquemine; a vote registration drive in St. Francisville, demonstrations in Hammond and Shreveport, and a march by 10,000 civil rights advocates in New Orleans.

By the end of the year, 12 Negroes had registered to vote in St. Francisville — out of several thousand who tried. But the Negro had little if anything to show for his demonstrations.

There were hundreds of criminal charges pending against civil rights demonstrators, ranging from disturbing the peace to inciting to riot.

The Negro went to the federal courts for additional gains in public school desegregation. Backed by the U. S. Justice Department, he sought legal remedies for what he considered discriminatory voting laws and practices.

He used or took advantage of economic pressures to take steps toward social integration.

These weapons proved, in some cases, highly successful.

The parishes surrounding Baton Rouge bore the brunt of the racial outbreaks of 1963.

On Aug. 22, Negroes marched on the Plaquemine city hall, touching off the most serious racial outburst in recent Louisiana history.

It ended on Sept. 1 with a near-riot. Police on horseback used tear gas and batter-operated cattle shock prod to break up a large crowd of demonstrators. Scores were arrested. The injured included several police officers.

A federal judge in Baton Rouge issued a restraining order against the Congress of Racial Equality, just before the CORE-led demonstrations began that day.

CORE National Director James Farmer participated in some of the earlier demonstrations and was jailed.

By the end of September, students in Plaquemine began boycotting their schools, and the trouble erupted again. Gas was used several times to quiet the demonstrating students. Finally, the parish threatened to enforce the state's compulsory attendance law, and the boycott ended.

In Clinton, CORE moved in during the summer to conduct a voter registration drive. Legal officials secured a restraining order against CORE demonstrations even before the demonstrations had begun.

The order set off some of the most unusual legal maneuvering in Louisiana history.

The restraining orders were temporary, and each time they expired state Judge John Rarick renewed them. Finally, civil rights leaders asked a federal court to take over.

A U. S. district court refused. The U. S. 5th Circuit Court of Appeals then told the state courts to hold up proceedings against CORE until it could determine whether state or federal courts had jurisdiction.

Rarick said the federal appeals court had no business in the case and continued to renew the restraining orders. He had issued his seventh renewal by mid-December.

There were small demonstrations and some arrests in Clinton.

In October, CORE began taking Negroes to the courthouse in St. Francisville, 35 miles northwest of Baton Rouge, to get them registered as voters. St. Francisville is the seat of government for West Feliciana Parish, which had no registered Negro voters.

Angry, but orderly crowds watched the Negroes enter the building. On Oct. 13 were registered.

They all voted in the Dec. 1 primary election for governor, without incident.

The Negro added to his gain in education during 1963. In Baton Rouge, the first public high school in the state were integrated. Twenty-four Negroes entered four formerly all-white schools under a court-approved reverse stair-step integration plan. The plan begins with the senior high school year, and works its way down one grade per year.

In New Orleans, the public school system eliminated bi-racial school districts in the first and second grades. Negroes entered the fifth grade of formerly all-white schools under a stair step plan that began with the first grade in 1960.

The Archdiocese of New Orleans continued its policy of opening all its schools to children of all races.

The Catholic diocese of Baton Rouge announced it would desegregate Catholic high school senior classes in East Baton Rouge Parish next year.

Token integration of New Orleans hotels began in 1963, principally due to the American Legion. The Legion's giant national convention, scheduled for New Orleans during the year, was switched to another city because facilities here were segregated.

Shortly thereafter, a federal court ruled that the hotels were private businesses and could admit Negroes if they wished. Within weeks several major hotels quietly began admitting Negroes.

Civil rights organizations in New Orleans banded together last summer to begin what they called a "direct action" campaign. They had secured some integration of lunch counters and were going after jobs above the median level in the city's large department stores.

They picketed the stores, refused to buy from them, and urged others of their race not to buy. The campaign was still on when the end of the year drew near, but already some stores had hired Negro clerks.

There were these other racial developments in 1963 in Louisiana:

— In Buras, at the southern end of Plaquemines Parish, a Catholic school which was integrated for one day last year and then boycotted the rest of the term, exploded and burned. Damage was heavy. Arson was ruled the cause. The school was closed.

— Leander H. Perez Sr., one of the state's leading segregationists, the undisputed political leader of Plaquemines Parish, turned the Gesell Report around and declared Alvin Callendar Field — a Navy Air Base — off limits to civilians.

— Perez proposed and the commission council agreed to the purchase of an old Spanish fort which stands in the middle of a swamp across the Mississippi River from Buras. The fort would be used as a prison for civil rights demonstrators should any show up in the parish.

— A number of public facilities in Lafayette were quietly desegregated.

— Baton Rouge lunch counters were desegregated.

— Nicholls State College admitted Negroes under a federal court order.

— A federal judge ruled that Tulane University was a private institution and could, if it wished, admit Negroes. Judge Frank Ellis handed down the ruling late in 1962, and the following February, a handful of Negroes registered for class.

— The grant-in-aid program — which gives a student money to attend a private school thus enabling him to avoid integrated public classrooms — doubled at a monthly cost to the state of $300,000.